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FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5924
INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 7499
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 6121
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 000593

SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: BHARAT BALLOT 09: MANMOHAN SINGH COMES OUT SWINGING

11. (SBU) Summary: At a rally this week to release the Congress Party's election manifesto, Prime Minister Singh attacked the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) Prime Ministerial candidate L.K. Advani in unusually combative, personal terms.

He described Advani as an "opportunist" and "unfit" to be Prime Minister. Further, Singh reminded the crowd that Advani "presided over" the Gujarat riots and the terrorist attacks on the Parliament and the Red Fort during his tenure as Home Minister. As for the election manifesto, Congress Party leaders believe Indian voters are not in the mood for drastic change. The manifesto makes the case for continuity while emphasizing the themes of security, dignity and prosperity. The document contains specific populist programs such as food guarantees for the poor and more concessions on farm loans as well as pie-in-the-sky promises such as connecting all villages to broadband internet in three years.

While offering something for nearly everyone, the Congress Party is sticking with the "aam aadmi" (common man) approach that worked in the 2004 general elections. And a newly emboldened Manmohan Singh clearly feels confident in making the campaign a head-to-head contest with Advani. End Summary.

Singh Takes On Advani

12. (U) For weeks, BJP Leader of the Opposition L.K. Advani has described Prime Minister Singh as "weak" or "the accidental Prime Minister." On March 24 it was Singh's turn on the campaign trail after convalescing following bypass surgery in late January. In unusually aggressive terms, the Prime Minister thrashed Advani and his record. Singh told the crowd Advani's only contribution to the national welfare was his "prominent role" in the demolition of the Babri mosque in 1992, which led to Hindu-Muslim violence. Staying with the communal theme, Singh criticized Advani for "presiding over" the Gujarat riots while he was Home Minister in 2002.

13. (SBU) Shifting to security, the Prime Minister reminded the crowd that the terrorist attacks on the Parliament and Red Fort also took place during Advani's tenure as Home Minister. Further, it was Advani who "rewarded" the hijackers of an Indian Airlines jet in 1999 by releasing them, Singh argued. The sharp-edged and personal attacks on Advani are wholly unrepresentative of the usually soft spoken

and mild tempered Prime Minister.

Sonia: Manmohan Singh is PM Candidate

14. (U) Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi put to rest continuing media-fuelled speculation that she - or anyone else - would be the party's Prime Minister candidate. When asked who would be the party's candidate, she coyly held up a copy of the manifesto, which has both her and the Prime Minister's portraits on the cover, with her hand over her own picture. Then she declared more directly, "The Congress Party's candidate for the prime ministership is Manmohan Singhji," and lauded Singh's experience and competence. "Nobody stands in front of Manmohan Singh," she told the party faithful.

Focus on Aam Aadmi

15. (U) The Congress Party manifesto - largely authored by the experienced jack of all political trades Pranab Mukherjee - reflects the party's focus on the common man, which in India generally means the rural poor. The document highlights the party's achievements over the last five years and offers more of the same. It calls for expansion of the job guarantee program, a new food security law, health insurance for those below the poverty line, more concessions for farm debt, jobs reservations for women and a host of programs for "nation-wide skill development" and "empowerment of weaker

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sections of society." While the manifesto mentions specific amounts of money for some programs and not for others, it does not contain anything as massive as the USD 17 billion farm loan waiver program of the 2008 budget. One large Indian daily aptly - and only slightly pejoratively - described the manifesto as "Less of the same."

Comment: Don't Fix What Ain't Broke

16. (SBU) With the release of its aam aadmi-focused manifesto, the Congress Party appears to be banking on a (perhaps complacent) desire for political continuity within the Indian electorate. The Indian voter is not clamoring for change. The aggressive attack by the Prime Minister on his rival seems to signify a belief in the Congress Party leadership that they can wrong foot the BJP and define the terms of the debate. The attack's personal nature implies that the Congress Party would welcome an election viewed largely as a choice between the sober economist Singh, and the "Hindu hardliner" Advani. Naturally, Advani will be busy burnishing his "moderate" credentials and raising the volume on his argument that the Prime Minister is merely the lapdog of Sonia Gandhi. But infighting among the BJP leadership has hurt the party and caused it to lose focus. As the opposition, the BJP needs to develop a compelling case for change. Thus far i hasn't done so. But regardless, it will likely be regional party alliances that determine the outcome of the election. End Comment.

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